

REA Work Group Report

Red Rock Pass Program

August 11, 2011

1. References:

- a. Minutes of the REA Work Group Meeting in Sedona, AZ on June 29, 2011.
- b. Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA), December, 2004.
- c. FLREA Forest Service Interim Implementation Guidelines, April, 2005.
- d. U.S. District Court Decision re: U.S. v James T. Smith, September, 2010.

2. Common themes of the comments we heard:

- a. In favor of the pass because:
 - needed to manage the high level of visitors
 - needed to protect the area and keep it clean and beautiful
 - the pass is affordable and not generally an issue for visitors, they expect a high level of services to be provided
 - without the pass, the area would degrade and harm tourism
 - the pass enables the FS to educate visitors on where to go and how to recreate responsibly
 - the pass helps to support a large volunteer effort to maintain trails
 - the pass is needed to mitigate declining FS budgets
- b. Opposed to the pass because:
 - FLREA prohibits fees for simply parking, general access, and hiking through the forest
 - FS is too eager to develop areas; leave them undeveloped and natural
 - fees create a disincentive for low income, minorities, and single moms with kids to visit the forest
 - FS is too reliant on fees to manage use, other no fee options are available
 - FS fees are not accounted for properly and sale of passes by the Chamber of Commerce is a conflict of interest
 - fees are too oppressive and confusing (Red Rock Pass plus concessionaire fees)
 - fees are generating money for tourism and over-development as opposed to protecting resources

3. The Work Group believes it is important to follow these guidelines in developing recommendations for the Red Rock Pass Program (also see references 1b, 1c, and 1d):

- a. follow the law and keep it simple
- b. fees should be commensurate with the benefits and services provided
- c. fee sites must have the required amenities; fee areas must be tightly configured and amenities must reasonably accommodate the visitor

d. fee sites or areas must reflect a substantial federal investment, provide significant opportunities for outdoor recreation, and demonstrate cultural or natural features that attract a high level of visitors

e. fees should be seamless and not layered

f. honor the fee prohibitions stated by FLREA, Section 3 (d), Limitations on Recreation Fees, where applicable

4. The Work Group believes that the Red Rock Pass Program can be configured to meet Forest Service objectives while attracting general public support. Regarding Proposals A and B, we offer the following recommendations:

a. Hwy 179 Scenic Corridor and Oak Creek Canyon Corridor. We believe these corridors meet the criteria for a fee area. They are tightly configured and support a high level of recreation use. The Hwy 179 sites support concentrated use at trailheads that attract a high level of visitors due to the scenic features and points of interest (such as Cathedral Rock, Bell Rock, and Courthouse Butte). The Oak Creek Canyon sites support concentrated use that is primarily focused on picnicking along the creek or water play activities in the creek.

b. Baldwin Recreation Site at Oak Creek. We support this as a standalone fee site as it supports concentrated use that is primarily focused on picnicking along the creek or water play activities in the creek.

c. Honanki, Palatki, and V Bar V Heritage Sites. We support these as standalone fee sites as they offer a cultural destination center with visitor education and interpretation.

d. Jim Thompson Recreation Site. We support this as a standalone fee site as it supports concentrated recreation use and requires special management due to its location adjacent to a Sedona residential neighborhood.

e. Boynton Recreation Site. We support this as a standalone fee site as it supports concentrated recreation use and requires special management due to cultural resources.

f. Doe Mountain Recreation Site. We support this as a standalone fee site as it supports concentrated use and attracts a high level of visitors due to scenic features and points of interest.

g. A map depicting these recommendations is attached at enclosure 1.

h. Concurrent with these recommendations, we must also point out that a vocal element of the public believes that FLREA prohibits fees for certain activities (see FLREA, Section 3 (d)). While the Forest Service has cleared its proposed fee areas and sites with the Office of General Counsel, there is still some concern by the public that certain activities must remain free to the public in order to comply with FLREA.

Although the Work Group acknowledges the Forest Service legal position and can support the fee areas and sites as proposed in paragraphs 4a through 4g above, we believe the Red Rock Ranger District should consider providing free permits for parking in fee areas/sites while engaged in backcountry activities in the Forest. The objective would be to garner better public support for the program and to improve public enjoyment of the forest. This could be done in collaboration with a diverse public group (see paragraph 4i(5) below) and implemented for a limited period to test the concept. Examples of free activities that could be allowed for Red Rock Pass fee areas/sites:

(1). General access to the forest. If a forest visitor wishes to access the forest (beyond the intense use area), consider issuing a free parking permit for backcountry access. Example: a backpacker wishes to park, hike, and camp overnight in a remote area of the forest using a recreation fee site or trailhead for access to the trail. A free (backcountry access) parking permit could be established for this activity.

(2). Walking or hiking through the forest without using the facilities and services. Example: a hiking group wishes to park at two different trailheads (fee or no fee) to set up a shuttle. They hike from one trailhead to the second trailhead and most of their hike is outside of the intense use area. A free (backcountry access) parking permit could be established for this activity.

(3). Incidental parking for scenic viewing or photography (we understand the Red Rock Pass is not required for this activity).

We appreciate the fact that a majority of the District's trailheads will remain free and enable the public to access the backcountry without a Red Rock Pass. However, some specific areas are not easily accessible unless one hikes from a fee trailhead.

i. We also recommend the Red Rock Ranger District consider adopting the following suggestions to the extent possible within legal constraints. These suggestions are largely based on public comments or concerns we heard during the field trip and meeting in Sedona.

(1). Provide a schedule of additional "no fee" days that will support greater opportunities for low income and minorities to visit the area.

(2). Provide a more seamless Red Rock Pass by eliminating separate concessionaire fees for standard amenity fee sites (such as West Fork Oak Creek, Grasshopper Point, and Crescent Moon day use sites). (We understand that the Forest Service cannot unilaterally do this, but we believe it should be pursued as opportunities arise.) In the meantime, work to re-instate the Grand Annual Pass that can be used for both Forest Service and concessionaire standard amenity fee sites.

(3). Encourage and expand volunteer programs that will enable participants to earn free passes.

(4). Continue to ensure that fee expenses comply with the 15 percent limit on administrative overhead. Due to the relatively low Forest Service take of revenues derived from fee machines, work to re-negotiate fee machine contracts or better yet,

phase out the fee machines over time and emphasize other options for acquiring the Red Rock Pass.

(5). Establish a diverse public group with balanced representation to provide a public forum for discussions on future fee proposals. Get early public participation and buy-in before finalizing any future fee proposals. Ensure that there is public support before new areas are developed. Consider whether it is more appropriate to keep the recreation setting less developed and more primitive.

(6). Discontinue the practice of allowing commercial buses free use of recreation fee sites for their clients. This use is an unfair burden on the Red Rock Pass Program and adversely impacts forest visitors who pay the fee but are frustrated by congested sites and overcrowding due to tour buses unloading their commercial passengers to use the facilities in the fee sites. Recommend these commercial bus companies be placed under a recreation special uses permit as soon as possible. In the meantime, we applaud and support your use of interim guidelines to limit the frequency and numbers of commercial bus visits to fee sites.

(7). Consider monitoring numbers of visitors on trails using volunteers and other resources. Consider establishing a daily visitor quota for trails that receive high levels of use. Encourage visitors to seek other, less intensely used trails and destinations.

5. In summary, we believe these recommendations should help achieve a stronger level of public support for the Red Rock Pass Program. Under our proposal, the number of fee sites would be 18 and the number of free sites would be 38. In addition, most areas of the forest will be accessible via the no fee sites because of the extensive trail linkages between fee and no fee sites. (Note: adopting the suggestions at paragraph 4h would provide additional no fee backcountry access). See the attached map that depicts the Trails and Urban Pathways Vision. See also the Sedona Trails Map by Emmitt Barks Cartography (handout during the driving tour).

6. The above recommendations were developed based on the existing environment faced by the Red Rock Ranger District, i.e., declining Forest Service budgets, growing visitor use levels and growing costs of operations and maintenance. However, we would like to suggest a way to reduce the reliance on recreation fee revenue. How can this be done? We believe that the Forest Service should continue and enhance its strong partnership with the City of Sedona for operations and maintenance related to National Forest recreation services near the City. As stated in the City of Sedona's Community Plan, forty-nine percent of the land area within its incorporated boundaries is National Forest land. Many Forest trailheads are located next to residential neighborhoods including Thunder Mountain, Broken Arrow, Soldier's Pass and Andante trailheads. The management of recreation use and traffic in those neighborhoods requires coordination with the City to reduce impacts and maintain services. Trailheads within the Red Rock Pass Program can be considered de facto "City" recreation sites for Sedona residents. The Forest provides substantial benefits to the City of Sedona in terms of open space, recreation, scenery, commercial tour use, and tourism revenues. We believe the City

of Sedona and the Forest Service can enhance their win-win partnership to benefit visitors and residents. It should be noted that similar partnerships are being used in other municipalities, for example Salt Lake City, Utah which is helping to sustain recreation and protect an important public watershed in the Wasatch Canyons area.

7. In summary, we commend all of the Forest Service personnel who participated in the June 29th tour and meeting. It was very productive for our work group to see firsthand the area and gain a better understanding of the fee proposals. Hearing the public comments in an open, public meeting was very helpful. From the public comments, we conclude that most folks who oppose the Red Rock Pass are opposed because of their conviction it is against the law (FLREA) or because they believe in the principle that use of public lands should be free to the public. The amount of the fee did not appear to be a major issue. Those in favor of the Red Rock Pass are advocates because they believe the program is critical to enable the Forest Service to properly manage the area.

8. Finally, pending consideration of public comment at the upcoming RAC meeting, the REA Work Group stands ready to recommend the RAC vote to support a revised Red Rock Pass Proposal as described in paragraphs 4a through 4g above.

Signed:

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